

Content Area Literacy: A Key to High School Reform



The Northeast & Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University



Literacy—the ability to read, write, and think effectively—enables teenagers to grapple with ideas, connect across space and time, and come to a better understanding of themselves and their world. Today’s teens need stronger literacy skills than ever before, yet high school educators speak urgently about students with low levels of reading and writing proficiency, often lamenting that “students can only read at the fourth- and fifth-grade level.” Businesses complain that high

school graduates don’t have the basic literacy skills necessary to make a living. And new statewide education standards lean heavily on literacy requirements, asking students to analyze, discuss, describe, and explain.

“Adolescent literacy has become a front-burner issue,” states Karen Rumery, director of assessment and curriculum for Gorham Public Schools in Maine. “Literacy is a cross-cutting tool and we cannot allow our students to go forward without adequate grounding.”

Teaching teenagers to read and write

Concern over low literacy levels has prompted school districts throughout the region to start literacy initiatives in their high schools. As the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University (LAB) has advanced its broader work on student-centered learning at the secondary level, many schools have asked how they can bring content-based literacy instruction to the classroom in ways that will make a positive difference for their students.

“If teachers support literacy development when they teach content, students will learn a lot more,” says Julie Meltzer, senior research associate at LAB partner organization, The Center for Resource Management (CRM). But high school teachers have historically lacked training in how to teach reading and writing, and most do not see literacy support as part of their job.

“For years we have just assumed that the English teacher would take care of everything,” says Rumery, “but content-area teachers need to play a role, too. We need to include adolescent literacy practice in their preparation.”

To aid teachers and schools in beginning this work, the LAB developed the Adolescent Literacy Support Framework, a diagnostic tool to help school leaders identify how to initiate improvement. The framework is drawn from research on reading comprehension, motivation, school reform, and second language acquisition.

Meltzer notes that the framework emphasizes four keys to adolescent literacy improvement:



- **Motivation**—Relevance to social and emotional needs of adolescents
- **Research-Based Strategies**—Reliance on proven strategies and techniques
- **Across the Curriculum**—Reading and writing in all content areas
- **Organizational Support**—Leadership capacity to ensure necessary support, sustainability, and focus

Two resources keyed to this framework have been developed for teachers: the Adolescent Literacy in the Content Areas Spotlight on The Knowledge Loom Web site (www.knowledgeloom.org/adlit) and *Adolescent Literacy Resources: Linking Research and Practice*, a research synthesis (www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/catalog.taf).



Schools begin the work

The Maine Department of Education recognized that literacy support is key to success on the state's standards and sought the LAB's help with improving literacy development. The LAB conducted workshops for Maine high schools and is working with the University of Maine to bring professional development opportunities to Maine educators. Over the next four years, the LAB and CRM will be piloting the Adolescent Literacy Support Framework in schools throughout Washington County, Maine.

"We are extremely interested in this project because we're realizing that adolescent literacy is really at the core of learning," says Betty Jordan, director of the Washington County Consortium for School Improvement.

One of the pilot schools, Jonesport-Beals High School in Jonesport, Maine, is a small, rural school of 104 students. The teachers feel they try to give their students a good foundation, yet they are also aware of a significant group of students they want to support much better; they believe that if it's not a schoolwide effort, it's not going to work.

"Most of my teachers have said that they weren't taught to teach reading when they were getting certified," says Jonesport-Beals principal, Colleen Haskell. "They assumed that by the time kids get to high school they know how to read. This project will help teachers learn strategies that they can use to teach reading and writing across the curriculum. If the bottom line is that the kids leave our high school with what they need for life, that's what I'm looking for."

With help from the LAB, the participating schools will learn what it takes to successfully develop literacy skills through content-area teaching and learning, an understanding that will benefit schools across the country. "This is broader than Washington County, Maine," says Jordan. "This is a national issue and concern."

Even so, there are few systemic secondary literacy initiatives in place anywhere in the country. The literacy work under way in Maine will provide procedural knowledge about how high schools can implement successful literacy programs, and the knowledge generated from

REGIONAL CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: LAB'S KEY STRATEGIES AND SIGNS OF PROGRESS

Problem: Low academic achievement due to secondary school students' lack of engagement with learning.

STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS

Restructure schools to increase student engagement with learning. After analyzing surveys and data from six area high schools, the LAB helped each school create a ninth-grade academy as the first phase of dividing into smaller learning communities.

Improve adolescent literacy programs and policies. The LAB created an online resource that supports four keys to a successful adolescent literacy initiative and is assessing its impact on student performance at eight rural high schools.

Problem: Failure to improve teacher training, development, and nurturing.

STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS

Develop purposeful learning communities (PLCs) in low-performing schools. The LAB coached four sites in developing purposeful learning communities and created profiles that capture the processes, supports, features, and effects of PLCs at each site.

Cultivate collaborative professional development communities. The LAB held online seminars for coaches of teachers using an innovative math curriculum and facilitated online study groups for teachers who were adopting standards-based instruction with their English language learners.

Problem: Lack of multilevel leadership capacity to improve quality of instruction and student learning in low-performing schools.

STRATEGIES AND PROGRESS

Document what is working to improve low-performing schools in one state. The LAB's site visits to low-performing schools resulted in a study that provided Connecticut with the baseline for second-year comparative analysis.

Develop networks of educational leaders to facilitate peer collaboration and dissemination of research. The Superintendents' Leadership Network and the Principals' Leadership Network held conferences and workshops and formed ongoing study groups.

this work will be available to other schools across the country.

"Students need more literacy skills because of today's technology, because they will be changing jobs, because the world is getting smaller," says Jordan. "This is an opportunity to provide those skills for the students so they are prepared, and so they can become quality lifelong learners."